

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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WHITE HOUSE STAFFBRIEFS CHURCH PRESS

by The Ven. Erwin M. Soukup

(Note: The following is not a "news" story, but rather the impressions of this editor on his return from a day spent with the White House Press Office in Washington. Objectivity is minimal in this report.)

WASHINGTON -- Thirty editors and writers for religious publications were invited to Washington March 7 for a meeting billed as "a special briefing" to cover domestic and foreign policy issues. It turned out to be a review of the statements and policies of the Carter administration given by one expert and several third-echelon members of a number of Executive Departments' staffs.

(In a by-lined article in the Chicago Sunday Sun-Times on March 16, Zay N. Smith writes that twice a month secular "media folk" are invited for the day to the White House's Old Executive Office Building to be briefed by the administration's staff. He writes: "The events are called 'Briefings for Non-Washington Editors and Broadcasters.' The invitations are mailgrammed to media folk from Kirkland, Wash., to Moncks Corner, S.C. Hundreds have responded since Carter took office. The visitors get free coffee, free lunch and Zbigniew Brzezinski, too." Also on the agenda were Liz Carpenter, deputy secretary for public affairs, and Richard Newstadt, the White House's assistant director for government reform.

(The religion writers were doled a half day's briefing, without lunch, without coffee. Hunter was no Brzezinski; Bario -- see below -- was not Carpenter.)

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The religious press attending were greeted by the Rev. Robert "Bob" Maddox, Baptist minister who had been first hired as a Carter speech writer and who is now Assistant to the President for Liaison with Religious Groups. Highest ranking White House staff members present were Patricia Y. Bario, Deputy Press Secretary, who hosted the meeting, and Robert E. Hunter, Director for Middle Eastern Affairs of the National Security Council.

Jody Powell was also scheduled to appear for a question-and-answer wrap-up, although it was already known that he was in Chicago briefing local Democrats for the upcoming Illinois primaries.

Filling in for her immediate superior, Kitty Higgins, Assistant Director for Human Resources, pointed out that the employment of young people will become increasingly a problem in the years to come. The Carter administration is proposing a two-point plan to meet the challenge. One will be a program to improve the work skills of youth, and the second will concentrate on basic education. She added that a focus will be made on dropouts. It is important, she noted, that the two programs go hand-in-hand, since skills without education or basic education without work skills were not marketable in the business community.

Higgins also said that it is vital that employers become involved in these training and education programs. The administration believes that the price tag for such programs would come to \$2 billion in 1982, and that documented accountability for the implementation of the programs would be required.

Hunter then led the editors and writers through a comprehensive outline of the history and circumstances of the Middle East crisis. America's present stance in this part of the world is to increase its posture of strength as a response to Russian aggression and Iranian obdurateness. The administration is doing this by its grain shipment reductions, the Olympic boycott, an increase in the defense budget, an increase in task force capacity, upgrading foreign bases, maintaining a high profile of fleet presence and one-to-one consultations with other countries on international security.

During a question period, Hunter said that, in general, the administration welcomed the efforts of religious leaders to free the Iranian hostages. They even were given briefings before going to Iran. He called the vote by the United States in the United Nations on the Israeli resolution "an error in communications" at the State Department. Mr. Carter had been misinformed about the wording of the resolution.



Hunter would not comment on the policies of former Secretary of State Henry J. Kissinger; nor would he respond to a question about the use of missionaries as spies by the Central Intelligence Agency.

R. D. Folsom, Assistant Director of the Domestic Policy Staff, presented the administration's views on an energy policy. Recommended at the present time are that public utilities discontinue using oil by 1989; that nuclear power not be closed out as an alternative fuel source; and that an increased emphasis be placed on conservation. When questioned, Folsom replied that there was sufficient oil in the ground around the world to last for at least from 50 to 100 years. It was his estimate that solar power would be commercially available and in use by the year 2000.

Substituting for Jody Powell was Ray Jenkins, Special Assistant to the President and former publisher of a newspaper in Birmingham, Ala. His time was spent in relating a series of entertaining anecdotes seemingly designed to demonstrate the human and humane facets of the president's character.

The briefing was held in the office suite of the Old Executive Office Building, the office where Cordell Hull, late Secretary of State, entertained the Japanese diplomats at the moment he was informed of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Major denominations represented at the briefing, including this editor from the Episcopal Church, were United Methodists, Southern Baptists, Mormons, Jewish, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventists and Northern Baptists.

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